

Prêtre tagbanua faisant des offrandes à Poco.

Fig. 1. 'Tagbanua priest making offerings to Poco'.
[From Alfred Marche, 1887]

A FOREST PEOPLE AND COVID-19: REPRESENTATIONS AND PRACTICES OF THE PALA'WAN HIGHLANDERS

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*A testimony of the past in the present, as
humans are confronted by the epidemic
in Palawan and in Paris ...*

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I would like to testify to the resilience of the *taw ät daya*¹ – 'upstream people' or 'highlanders' – as seen in their representations and behaviors in relation to epidemics in this area of the world, and especially during this time of the coronavirus pandemic.

Palawan stretches like a bridge on the West Philippine Sea² from the Sulu Archipelago at the tip of Sabah, Borneo, north towards Luzon. On this island there are three autochthonous groups speaking languages of the Austronesian family. From south to north these are: the Pala'wan³, the Tagbanwa (going up along the central mountain range), and finally north of the province's capital, the Batak, a small Negrito population⁴.

¹ Palawan phonology is composed of 4 vowels: /i/; /u/; /a/; /ä/ and 16 consonants, of which 13 are orals: /p/; /b/; /t/; /d/; /s/; /r/; / k/; /g/; /' /; /w/; /l/; /y/; /h/ and 3 nasals: /m/; /n/; ng/. Back a : /ä/, is pronounced like "a" in the English word "all". /'/represents glottal stop (like *maragsä* in Tagalog).

² Today, the West Philippine Sea designates the Philippines' national waters on the maritime space named by cartographers South China Sea.

³ "*Pala'wan*" is the way the people refer to their language and to themselves in the highlands. "*Palawan*", the name of the island, is the common way to designate the indigenous group. "*Palawanun*" is an alternate to *Palawan*. "*Palawano*" is the way the Christians are designating the indigenous people of the south of the island, and the way they refer to the language of the "*Katutubo*". "*Palaweño*" refers to the inhabitants of Puerto Princesa and other towns speaking Cuyunon.

⁴ Distinct from the Batak of Sumatra.

The Pala'wan form a small egalitarian forest society. Hunters using the blowpipe, food gatherers, and swidden agriculturists, they live in scattered houses or form small hamlets separated by valleys around Mount Mantalingahan. According to their animist ontology, *Pangkät* is a 'malevolent being', *taw mära'at*, and carrier of all 'illnesses', *ingläw*, or *bala'*. Pronouncing his name is avoided in order not to offend him, and one adopts a respectful behavior by calling him *Upu' Ingläw*, 'Grandfather Illness'. He is assimilated to *Sä'itan*, doubtless the most dreaded of all (Revel 1990b).

Pangkät is the cause of 'serious infectious and contagious diseases', *dät dakit näng kälang sakit*, that provoke *läw läbäw*. A human community in a given location (in this case the foothills and the highlands in the southern part of the island), and at a specific time (during the season of the Northeast monsoon winds), is aware of being threatened with death by an incurable disease.

What does the term *läw läbäw* mean?

Läw läbäw designates certain infectious and eruptive diseases and is particularly dreaded when hot winds blow in from the sea in February to March bringing the 'dry season' *täg-init*, which is a lean season of 'hunger for rice' and weakening physical resistance of men while the work in the 'upland field', *uma*, is at its peak. This is the time for beginning a new agrarian cycle, the opening of a new 'swidden' *pängririk*; it is the 'season of felling trees', *pänambang*.

Läw läbäw is indeed 'an epidemic', but of a special kind.

One of the most serious illnesses qualified as *läw läbäw* is measles, which we witnessed in February 1972, in the area between the Tämlang and Mäkägwa' River valleys where we were living. There is no specific term to designate this contagious disease but only a binomial description: *läw läbäw mängaturäy* or 'the epidemic in tiny grains of millet.' *Läw läbäw mängma'is* 'the epidemic in grains of corn', another highly feared disease, probably smallpox.

According to the Pala'wan, its 'signs' (or symptoms), *pägingdanan*, are: 'chills and cold', *ramig* and *sipun*; 'fever', *agnäw*; 'inflammation of the entire body', *mämuräd bilug*; 'chest pains,' *mapyät däbdäb*; 'shortness of breath' (or panting), *kurang ät ginawa*.

Abay, the 'respiratory complications', soon appear notably in the very painful sensation of a 'sharp and burning object', *taräm*, piercing the chest; 'red eyes', *mata märägang*, with a burning sensation (conjunctivitis); the

'chest constricted', *mäpyät däbdäb*; and 'shortness of breath', *kurang ät ginawa*. 'Cough', *ikäd*, becomes *ikäd-ikäd*, which designates pulmonary complications (bronchitis, pneumonia, broncho-pneumonia).

There are certainly, in this tropical region, other serious and contagious diseases that can spread and that we know now more or less how to control such as: *suka-suka*, 'repeated vomiting' (cholera); *sakit bätäng*, 'stomach ache' (dysentery). There is also *ampus* or *tibi*, 'TB' (tuberculosis), an endemic disease given that for a long time the Department of Health has opted for the non-vaccination of children; finally, *äldäw-äldäw*, 'the daily', or leprosy, with which I was particularly confronted, but that would be quite a different story.

In the highlands, where the people are not reached by healthcare, they are very fearful of *läwläbäw*, the epidemic that strikes the respiratory system, and is fatal. During our one-year stay among them, we shared the ordeal of measles. All the sick children were gathered in the large meeting-house of Bungsud and it was very sad. Despite the distribution of penicillin that we were able to receive thanks to a doctor from Brooke's Point who had come previously to visit us, our help proved to be derisory in view of the number of children – like Pritinyu, the most joyful one – and the adults – like the two daughters of Usuy, the wife of Mägräga', her sister and so many others – who were carried off, for they realized that the disease that infested the region 'was severe', *may Ingläw na banar*, and could blindly affect anyone.

It was commonly said: "*Maya Ingläw dyä*", 'They have the Disease', whereas the shaman used more esoteric terms: *mäkädungläy* or *mabulinäynäy* at the time of the cure, to allude to this grave evil, in addressing the invisible humans, while he attempted to bring back the *käruđuwa*, the 'soul-double' of a patient, into his/her body through negotiation with the 'Evil ones', *Sä'itan*, these other Humans, always in quest for equality.

However, *läwläbäw* is reserved for epidemic respiratory system diseases and it is the term used today to designate COVID-19, distinct from the term *täringkaso*, borrowed from the Tagalog (and borrowed further from the Spanish *trancaso*), designating the 'flu'. Resorting perhaps to a mild euphemism, *agnäw*, the 'fever', is also currently used to designate the coronavirus epidemic.

Today all around the world we are confronted with symptoms affecting the respiratory system and we feel a similar fear and helplessness in the face of a new totally unknown virus, that has struck the entire human community in the course of the year 2020 and transformed an epidemic into a pandemic.

Our efforts are multiple with the help of physicians, researchers, laboratories and experts, according to the various choices of governments.

So how can this epidemic be controlled when homes are several hours away by a very arduous walk to the road⁵, from which one must still travel 17 kms. before reaching a modest provincial hospital?

Depending on the type of illness, the Pala'wan have recourse to diverse protective 'charms' *sukang*: strings of leaves 'to repel' ailments, *pānulak*; and 'magic formulas', *tāgtag*. But for *läwlabāw*, once a year they resort to a ritual. It is a practice that has been observed also among the Tagbanuwa farther to the north, among the Tausug in the Sulu archipelago farther to the south, as well as in Borneo and Indonesia (Cf. Sellato 2020).

The collective ritual of *Tuläk bälü*, 'Driving away disease'

Every year in the 'Monsoon of the Coconut,' *Barat ät Nyug* (Scorpio constellation), when the late varieties of rice are being harvested in early December, the period *Täbäs*, 'the End' begins: the annual agrarian cycle comes to a close. Then, the Pala'wan see blooming in the river beds *tugbu*, (*Saccharum spontaneum*), a grass that, according to their representations, is the rice of *Pangkät* the 'Evildoer'. It is the staple that requires a complement just as in any meal for a 'genuine human', *tāw banar*. The 'soul-double', *käruđuwa*, of a person is precisely the complementary dish, or 'viand', *isda'an*, that 'Grandfather Disease' wants to eat. This is the season that precedes *läwlabāw*, the epidemic that affects the respiratory system.

According to the custom, in order to ward off the dangers ahead, the 'Headman', *Pänglima*, in the presence of the members of the local group and for their protection, used to build a *māligay*, a pretty little shelter with a roof decorated with four pleated brooms placed on a raft, where they deposit delicate offerings: 7 bowls of sticky rice, 7 plates of fried chicken or 7 live chicks, 7 pieces of sugar cane, 7 cigarettes, 7 betel quids, and 7 glasses of water. They are meant to provoke *pätulak*, 'dismissal', 'driving away', the epidemic of respiratory diseases.

⁵ In the '70s people had to walk to the road then wait for a rare bus, "The Royal", or hike to "Bunbun" (Brook's Point, 17 kms. to the north). During Martial Law, "PD roads" were built by the military and motorbikes started to reach the foothills. Today, there are tricycles that go all the way to Brooke's Point, there are also vans from Bataraza (and further south) to Brooke's Point and Puerto Princesa.

On the shore, these offerings are placed on a small raft and accompanied to the sea where it is hoped it will drift at the whim of waves and winds to the open sea.⁶ Several years ago, on my way to a neighboring island on my outrigger boat, by chance, I saw a small raft loaded with offerings floating in the open on the West Philippine Sea, perhaps a sign of a deadly threat taken away.

By contrast, the Tagbanwa have a hierarchical society and a cosmogony quite different from the Pala'wan. In order to protect the human community from the terrifying *Salakap* or dangerous spirits floating on 'large boats', *sakayan*, transporting the souls of the dead to the outer limits of the world, the Tagbanwa had two rituals: one performed three times a year, *Pagbuuy*, and the other more important, *Runsay*, celebrated only once a year, four days after the full moon of December. The ritual consists of five sequences in the presence of the entire Tagbanwa community and for the common good of all its members as described by R. B. Fox (1982:238-246; Marche 1887:319-333; and see Fig.1). As soon as the raft disappeared in the darkness of the high seas, on the shore, men and women used to rejoice and began to sing and dance until dawn. By means of these elaborate rituals, floating a raft loaded with tiny delicious food (chicken, fish, cooked rice, betel quids) as an act of appeasement and seduction to ward off misfortune, they tried to thwart the plan of the *Salakap*.

***Päsawud üt ingläw*, 'Announcement of a contagious disease'**

In this time of COVID-19 where all of us have to be responsible in our conduct, the Pala'wan highlanders, who live between 100 and 900 meters in altitude in scattered habitat surrounded by the huge forest of dammars and dipterocarps, do follow a similar behavior as an immediate response: they practice very strictly 'isolation', 'avoidance of all contact', or *ali*, 'quarantine' – withdrawing to the highlands, living in autarky, and prohibiting all access by outsiders to hamlets and houses.

These days, they have radios and mobile phones, and are therefore warned by the airwaves, but, they must observe complete silence. If someone calls them they don't answer. On the borders of Tigaplan River, around Mount Iluilu, for two long months this year (from March 16th to mid-May), they did not

⁶ It is difficult to evaluate distance in the highlands, from the foothills to the road it is 6 kilometers and more to reach Uring-Uring, a Jama Mapun settlement on the seashore (Cf. Maranan & Revel-Macdonald 1991: 45-61).

come down to bring the *bägtik* almaciga resin crystals⁷ that they harvested in the forest of *Käbätangan*, 'The Trunks'. Only very few men have come to the warehouse of Ämas bringing their collected resin, or *bägtik* (personal communication from Norlita Colili). As a result, they did not receive the monetary equivalent of their gathering and transport on men's backs. Nor did they try to pick up the *gantang* of rice,⁸ canned food and other products from the government's Social Amelioration Program (SAP) through the Department of Labor and Employment, the Municipality of Brooke's Point and the Dutch NGO Inter-Union for Conservation of Nature, which are distributed to the *sitios* at the foothills and to the highlands by the Non-Timber Forest Products Exchange Programme Philippines in Palawan (NTFP-EP Philippines) and the Samahan ng mga Palawano sa Amas Brooke's Point (SPABP), an Indigenous Peoples Organization, as intermediaries.

To me it speaks eloquently of their capacity to live in autarky, feeding on the produce of their 'upland fields', *uma*, a complex ecosystem; and of the 'houses' surroundings', *lagwas*, a vegetal clutter like the nearby forest, rich in semi-protected useful plants (fruits, tomatoes, garlic, medicinal and technological plants); as well as the 'forest', *gäba*, and the closer secondary forests, *bangläy*, *täring gäba'an*.

In this annual lean season, tubers (yams, *ubi*; manioc, *kumbahan*; taros, *taläs*; sweet potatoes, *sangläy*), products gathered in the 'wilderness', *talun*, hearts of *bätbat* (*Arenga undulatifolia*) and other species of palms; banana hearts and terminal buds of banana, *ärias* and *pusu' ät punti*; wild yam, *käräg*; bamboo shoots, *rabung*; fern, *paku* and young shoots of *pulugan ransang* and *lilima* (*Dioscorea cumingii*); hearts of some zingiberaceae and fruits of some trees, besides the fruits of rattan, *amagas*; 33 varieties of mushrooms, *kulat*, and 12 of snails, *patong*, as well as modest resources from fishing in the rivers and waterfalls, *ulpis*, *ägta*, gobi fish; 'eels', *indäräg*; fresh water crabs, *käyängät* and fresh water shrimps, *urang*; as well as from hunting 'birds', *bägit*, all that has helped them to survive for so many centuries in the past (Xhauflair et al. 2017:169-189).

If someone tries to go to their homes, they run away and hide in the forest. The hamlet is deserted and the people reappear after the intruder leaves. This

⁷ Almaciga resin, also known as "Manila copal", is collected from the sap of the almaciga tree (*Agathis philippinensis*) for the international market. It is used in manufacturing varnishes, paints, plastic, and other products (Cf. NTFP-EP 2018).

⁸ 1 *gantang* = 8 *chupas* = 2.5 kgs

solidarity among all the people reveals the trust they place in this conduct of strict isolation, their one and only recourse in confronting *läwlabäw*. In September-October, the highlanders keep on following their own quarantine by not going down to the little markets, *tabu'an*, in the foothills, nor to the town of Brooke's Point. Up to November they are harvesting the successive varieties of their upland rice and are self-sufficient.

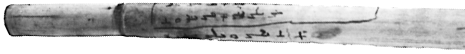
Unlike the Dayak of Borneo, the Pala'wan are an aural people; they have no visual arts, except for beautiful basketry. There is no terrifying anthropomorphic statue at the edge of the villages to protect the human community of a place.

Formerly, and until 1970-80, they used a pre-Islamic syllabary of Indian origin which they had borrowed at the turn of the 20th century from their Tagbanwa neighbors and called *Surat Inabärlan* or *Surat Tagbanwa* (Revel 1990a:30-40; 2017:188-200). This syllabary did not have the function of transmitting knowledge or composing *ambahan* poems like the Hanunóo young men at the "age of romance" in Mindoro (Postma 1989; Conklin 1949, 2007). They had a completely different function: to send letters, notices and announcements in order to establish long-distance communication between parents and relatives, in order to maintain the rights and duties between the members of the kindred in a region of endogamy (Revel: 1990a).

It was a question of transmitting commands, imperatives, and authoritative words: *Tingkag*, 'Convocation'; *Bawal*, 'Prohibition'; *Tabang*, Call for help; *Ukuman* 'Judgment'; as well as a major warning, *Päsawud üt Ingläw*, 'Epidemic announcement'.

Writing, for the Pala'wan, then became the 'megaphone', not of a religious, literary or knowledgeable word, but of a public health, and a juridical, word issued by either the *Pänglima*, the 'Headman', or the 'Judge', *Ukum*. These very brief missives, doomed to disappear by the very nature of the ephemeral supports on which they were incised (strips of bamboo, banana leaves), were aimed at the protection and balance of the persons and related local groups. They were put in the ground on fragile frameworks (Fig. 2), erecting concise messages at crossroads to stop any visitor, forbidding them simply but formally, from proceeding to the households and their inhabitants.

a)



b)

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“O my aunt, do not come to our house I am writing this to you” - Nita

c)

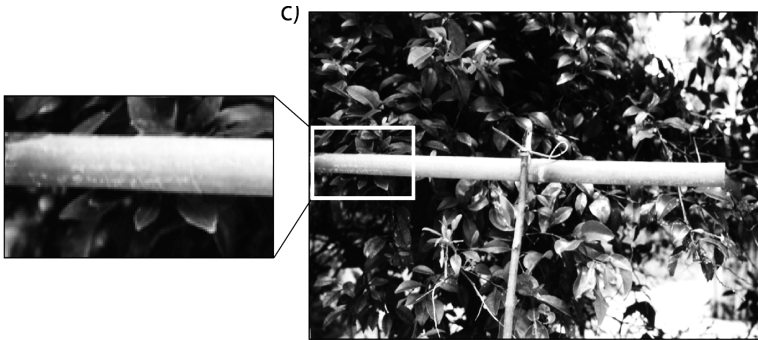


Figure 2. Päsawud ät Ingläw. Announcement of an epidemic incised on a bamboo tube fixed on the trail to stop the visitor, in this case a specific relative, and preventing anyone to proceed farther.

[Photos, transcription, and translation by Nicole Revel. Montage by Hermine Xhaufclair.]

The situation as of October 21, 2020

As of June 21, 2020, The Philippines (population 110 Million) reported to the World Health Organization (WHO): 30,052 cases; 7,893 recoveries; and 1,169 deaths from coronavirus. These numbers do not seem very high considering the urban population in Metro Manila and Cebu. The very insularity of this country (7,641 islands) is an obstacle to the propagation of the epidemic, a protection for the local populations.

Palawan, which is the 5th most inhabited Island, seems to have been spared from contagion (except in the north, where an Australian citizen has been repatriated as the epidemic started, and four more cases were registered). They all recovered. As of this writing, only one casualty has been recorded. By October 2020: 360,775 people have been infected; 310,642 recovered; 6,690 fatalities; and some 4.16M people have been tested.⁹

If we take into consideration the “Theory of 3 Ps”: Prevention – Precaution - Preparation (Keck 2020), the long lasting quarantine imposed by the Philippine government on Palawan since March 16th up to May 15th (Enhanced Community Quarantine or ECQ, followed by General Community Quarantine or GCQ) of more than two months is relevant to “Precaution” as well as the strict isolation, *ali*, set up by the highlanders. For them there is no other recourse: it is effective and conducted according to their tradition, *adat*.

At the national level, the quarantine was relaxed on May 31, shifting the archipelago to GCQ and kept on ECQ or put on MGCQ (Modified General Community Quarantine). This easing up continued until June 15th; MGCQ was then generalized and shifted to GCQ in risky regions where the government decided to restore the former quarantine.

For a population with an exponential growth rate, the lack of beds in urban hospitals, rural health units separate from hospitals in the provinces, and the lack of intensive care equipment and test kits, there is no other way than “Precaution,” and this means confinement Phase 1 as wisely chosen by the Government.

As of today, after implementing one of the longest lockdowns in various islands and large cities, a less restrictive policy could be chosen. However, the domestic flights that allowed 700 citizens to return to their residence from Manila to Brooke’s Point in August 2020 are once more suspended from

⁹ For updated statistics see the COVID-19 tracker of the Department of Health: <https://www.doh.gov.ph/covid19tracker>.

October 12 to 31. The League of Provinces of the Philippines wants to maintain the requirements of medical clearance certification and travel authority for non-authorized persons away from their residences and locally stranded individuals to contain the further spread of the new coronavirus in their respective areas. Mayors of the metropolis recommended to maintain Metro Manila under GCQ until the end of 2020.

Despite these measures, according to the WHO, as of October 17th 2020, the Philippines has the highest number of COVID-19 cases in Southeast Asia and is among the top 20 countries in the world in terms of coronavirus infection.

For urban people in Metro Manila, this pandemic and the strict government measures to try to curb it are accompanied by a tremendous loss of employment and jobs, a higher level of violence and an intense misery in the slums.

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